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INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 0229
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RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 0211
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW 0148
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 0143
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 0145
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 CHENNAI 000116

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: BHARAT BALLOT 09: BJP SITTING PRETTY IN KARNATAKA

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08 CHENNAI 350

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¶1. Summary: On April 23 voters in seventeen districts of the southern state of Karnataka will cast their votes in the state's first phase of voting in India's national elections. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) did exceptionally well in 2004, winning eighteen seats. Congress came in second with a total of eight seats while the regional party Janata Dal (Secular) (JDS) took two. The general consensus in Bangalore is that the BJP is again in a strong position, and is expected to win at least fourteen of the twenty eight seats up for grabs. While most felt Congress' chances of defeating the BJP in the state are relatively weak, attacks on local churches in Mangalore and pub goers by Hindu extremists have helped consolidate the Muslim and Christian vote behind the party. As a result, observers feel they have a reasonable chance of maintaining the eight seats they currently hold. While our contacts confirmed that the tacit understanding between the JDS and Congress would enable them to garner additional votes, the majority agreed that their inability to put together a strong unified front, coupled with the BJP's extensive financial network would pave the way for another BJP victory in Karnataka. End Summary

BJP sits pretty

¶2. (SBU) We traveled to Karnataka in the lead-up to the first phase of voting, where seventeen districts are scheduled to cast their votes on April 23. We met with politicians, journalists and business contacts all of whom predicted that the BJP will win around half the twenty eight parliamentary seats from Karnataka. For the most part, our interlocutors felt that caste will be a critical factor. According to the editor of a local Kannada daily, the BJP will retain its hold on the two regions primarily comprised of members of the Lingayat, Madiga and Oddar castes which have historically supported the BJP. He predicted the BJP would win all eleven seats in districts where these three castes dominate the

parliamentary constituencies. In addition, the BJP has successfully shored up support in areas where they have not typically fared well by engineering defections from opposition Congress and JDS members. According to the editor the defections will enable BJP to garner enough votes to win an additional four or five seats.

Hindu extremists affect BJP chances along the coast

13. (SBU) Highly-publicized attacks on Christian churches and young pub goers by Hindu extremist groups have sparked fear amongst minorities. Opposition party leaders play on these fears by comparing the Hindu nationalists to the Taliban in Pakistan and Afghanistan (refs C and D). Roshen Baig, a member of the Karnataka State Assembly and a Congress party Muslim leader, said that this fear had consolidated the Muslim and Christian vote behind the Congress party. According to Baig "the Muslim community does not want a Talibanization of Karnataka. The youth is also tired of the radical Hindus; this will play out at the polls." Baig expects the party to win three seats in Bangalore on account of the increased minority vote. A local political commentator concurred with Roshen Baig's analysis on the minority vote. He believes that this consolidation will cost the BJP a couple of seats.

14. (U) Secular Hindu voters in urban areas will choose Congress according to a majority of our interlocutors. Attacks on pub goers in Mangalore and parts of Bangalore have shaken their confidence in the BJP, forcing them to gravitate back to Congress according to the former editor of the Economic Times. In the absence of an inspiring prime ministerial candidate, he said, secular Hindus will stay home or vote for Congress.

Tacit understanding between Congress and JDS

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15. (U) Our interlocutors agreed that there exists a tacit understanding between Congress and JDS. JDS's decision to contest twenty one seats rather than all twenty eight seats in the state was cited as primary evidence of the agreement. The JDS has not fielded a candidate where former Congress Chief Minister Bangarappa is running against Karnataka Chief Minister B.S. Yeddyurappa's son. Similarly, in Bangalore, Congress is giving no real support to its marginal candidate standing against former JDS Chief Minister H.D. Kumaraswamy. Congress and JDS are strong in both constituencies and could harm each other's prospects if they fielded strong candidates against each other.

16. (SBU) This tacit understanding, however, is far from perfect. Roshen Baig cites a Bangalore constituency where Congress is running a strong candidate against the BJP. The JDS's Muslim candidate appears to have adopted for a low key approach, presumably ceding to the Congress. But his workers remain active in seeking support at mosques, which Baig worries will split the Muslim vote. Baig believes campaigning by the JDS candidate's workers will nix the Congress candidate's chances.

17. (SBU) The BJP also has a huge financial advantage, due to its ties to the state's influential mining industry. Many observers pointed to the recent incident in Bellary district where the Karnataka election commission seized over three million dollars from a BJP supporter's residence and vehicle. A local political analyst explained that these funds are ordinarily used to pay the parties' volunteers, and to buy favors, such as food, clothing and alcohol, to distribute to voters. He added that while caste plays a critical role in election, candidates are also able to build their following by buying votes. He stated that cost of one vote had now increased from ten dollars to approximately twenty dollars. Our contacts agreed that the BJP's ongoing relationship with the local mine owners has provided them with the necessary financial clout to provide more favors to voters thus expanding their reach within Karnataka. A correspondent with The Hindu told post that neither Congress nor the JDS can compete with this financial advantage.

BJP state government's fate depends on national elections

18. (SBU)Comment: A strong showing in Karnatka's Lok Sabha elections would be another step in the BJP's effort to establish its first reliable foothold in South India. It has done so largely through a sustained effort to build the party from the grassroots that has steadily increased its share of the vote over time. Some of its recent success stems from factors that might not always favor the BJP like the huge cash advantage it has due to its relationship with the mining industry and the inability on Congress and JDS to form an alliance. But the long term outlook for the BJP in Karnataka will only be brighter should the party have another strong performance in these elections.

End comment.

SIMKIN